

Pumping Up the Muslim Brotherhood

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The Muslim Brotherhood's presence really only became palpable on Wednesday when the violence began. The greater the violence, the more the Brotherhood's organizational tenacity in resisting comes to the fore (the other groups, about 95 percent of the ongoing revolt, have no such resistance history or organization). The Brotherhood was originally organized in the 1920s and 30s into paramilitary cells along European (fascist and communist) models to readily disperse with intact units when the power against them was weak, and rapidly re-unite when that power weakened. Since 1952, they have failed miserably in every attempt to use violence to come to power. During the first five years of Mubarak's reign, when he was still consolidating his grip on the country, the Brotherhood reverted to an uncompromising stance but their paramilitary organization (weapons, training, logistics, etc.) had become greatly reduced over the years and less than ever a match for the army (although the cellular political structure was still able to take almost any blow against it).

The real danger to this popular uprising is Mubarak pumping up the Muslim Brotherhood with the (witting or unwitting) complicity of Western politicians and pundits. I see this happening in the mainstream press today.

Mubarak, yesterday, outlined the scenario:

First, Mubarak states that if he steps down now, chaos will follow and allow the famously well-organized Brotherhood = Al Qaeda-in-waiting to fill the void. Mubarak here is implicitly counting on the fact that hardly any American pundits or politicians know anything about the other groups, or have even heard of them. The actual organizers and supporters of the revolt are represented in the American press, and especially on TV, as just an amorphous mass. This, of course, drives Egyptians on the street and in the know plain nuts. But who on the outside really cares what these people are doing anyway, especially as they fit into no familiar or convenient narrative?

Then, Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's intelligence chief, recently appointed vice-president, and most likely successor says that the regime is willing to talk to the Bogey Brothers after all, thus giving the Brotherhood the official cache of The Opposition. When in reality, until Wednesday, people on the street were about as supportive -- or led -- by the Brotherhood as the man on the moon.

The more violence that the regime can instigate, the more likely the self-fulfilling prophecy of a large Brotherhood role in any regime change, because the real rebels will have been dispersed from public and political space by the effects and attention to the violence. That will be a momentous misfortune for most everyone, including the United States.

It will also sow the seeds of civil war because there are many junior officers and soldiers who do know what 's going on and don't like what's happening to the young people and families from all walks of life - families just like their own - which drive and support this revolt. And this discontent within the army could be its undoing, and with it, a truly radical unraveling of Egypt and the whole region.

What of the al-Qaeda's relation to the Brotherhood? There is an historical and intellectual link, but no stronger than, say, between some mainstream Christian fundamentalist groups and radical White Supremacists in our own country. Sayyid Qutb, the ideological mentor of Al Qaeda's founders, was always a marginal figure in the Brotherhood. His main followers, who formed groups like Takfir wal Hijra and Islamic Jihad which originally developed the ideology and action plans for violent jihad, were not themselves members of the Brotherhood (nor had most ever been). Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a former leader of Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda's chief ideologue, has spent his active political life vilifying the Brotherhood as "false Muslims," cowards, and allies of Crusaders and Jew because of their willingness to peacefully participate in Egyptian politics, and lately for showing sympathy to Christians and Shi'ites who have been bombed and killed in Egypt, Iraq, and elsewhere.

The Brotherhood -- along with all credible secular, liberal and centrist opposition -- vehemently opposes the Egyptian constitution because of the emergency powers that give the President and army unending ability to control the country by fiat and force; however, over the last two decades the Brotherhood has clearly forsworn violence as a means of constitutional change. So it was stunning to hear White House spokesman Robert Gibbs come from Mars on Monday to say that the U.S. would have no contact with the Brotherhood unless they consented to the rule of law, renounced violence and agreed to participate in the democratic process - things the Brotherhood has been saying and doing for years (anyone surfing the Brotherhood's website, Ikhwanweb.com, would see that).

Sure, I think like most people in Egypt and around the world that the Brotherhood's desired end state of an Arabized pan-Islamic supernational rule by Sharia is obnoxious, oppressive, intellectually and socially retrograde, and dangerous for global stability. And I'm equally certain that their uncompromising stance on Israel will not help to make the Middle East a better place. But, as I've said before, it's because democracies tolerate differences, even organized crackpots so long as they aren't violent, that the "democratic community" of nations is pretty much internally free of war. So let Egypt join.